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ABSTRACT

To make literature meaningful to children and youth, the teacher needs to do more than make books available and blow the bellows of motivation. Teachers can gain more insight into reading by analyzing their own behaviors as they read adult literature, and they can use their insight in helping the student discover the way to extract meaning from the printed page. Twenty-eight examples of literature are used in this paper to illustrate the hazards encountered in one adult's attempts to achieve insight, reflection, and appreciation through the reading act. About the same number of points appear in an appendix, detailing situations which make readers uneasy about their solutions and the ways in which they make wrong choices. (Author/JM)

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PAPER PRESENTED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI, April 8, 1977
ON THE OCCASION OF THE RETIREMENT OF PROFESSOR A. STERL ARTLEY

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READING AND LITERATURE

In this century we have amassed a great treasure of books for children and youth. Thanks to pioneers like Dora V. Smith, Carleton Washburne, and May Hill Arbuthnot, we have learned how to beguile readers with the right books for the right child. But it remains for the last quarter of this century for us to learn to help children to become insightful, reflective, and appreciative readers. Few of us read adult literature with awareness of our own behaviors in getting meaning as we read. How can we help children get meaning if we don't even know how we do it?

Many researchers these days are probing the reading process by observations from outside the skull. They are finding clear evidence that even readers with good vocabularies can have trouble processing reading material for its meaning. (Cromer, 1970; Clay and Imlach, 1971; Guthrie and Tyler, 1976; Isakson and Miller, 1976).

For their experiments many investigators are using contrived sentences rather than the broad varieties of style in literature.

Outside-the-skull research takes much more preparation in design than inside-the-skull research. I understand that the reason a brain is inside the skull to begin with is that it is otherwise worse than tapioca in holding its shape. God should have done something for the abdomen, too.

But I have decided to contribute to the confusion by studying my own reading behaviors as I read what adults write

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for adults. In my house little pieces of paper tend to gather on tables next to chairs,sofa,bed,and dining table. I have brought some of them to share my observations with you. I remember when I was young I found great comfort in learning that Edward L. Thorndike's eye movements weren't always perfect. Maybe the very few of you who have an inflated opinion of me will enjoy this excursion into my fallibility. Meanwhile,do give me credit for realizing that an introspective study of one adult's experience is only that. My only claim is that one adult's experience is better than none.

Divergent thinking - a Boon to the Expectant Reader

The better a writer is, the harder it seems to be to predict his vocabulary or syntax or direction in thought. A correspondent writes defensively,

> "Dear Soandso,
>
> Sorry I haven't written. So many things got in the way."

But E.B.White,who spun Charlotte's famous web,wrote to his fiancee,

> "Dear Katharine:
>
> I once started a letter to you (date uncertain) but it dried up and got crumbly. Later I started another, but it got wet and mouldy. I intend to get this one down on the floor with my knees and push it into an envelope even if it's got maggots."

What other things might get in the way of letter-writing? Children can tell you. Divergent thinking is probably a very good preparation for the unexpected turns in a writer's sentences.

Sue Koenig's first grade class at Maple Grove Elementary School in Golden,Colorado, finished the sentences which began:

"A rolling stone gathers no....
People who live in glass houses shouldn't...
A bird in the hand is worth..."

An adult class given "My brother-in-law is like a cannon" and asked for explanations came up with:

"He is perfectly cylindrical.
He is always blowing off.
He is made of cast iron.
He won't budge from his established position.
You can depend on him for protection.
He doesn't react unless you provide the ignition."

-- clear proof that expectation is a fine thing but you can't assume that you and the author have planned every inch of the trip together.

Reading Hazards of Children

Marie Clay has said that reading requires the finding, using,checking,and correcting of information. She points out that the reader does not always find an adequate signal to tell him that he is right or wrong. He has to be aware

of dissonance from spacial,semantic,syntactic,or morpho-phonemic cues,which may cause him to correct his visual perception of letter and word forms and his conception of the meanings,too.

Have you ever had the experience of looking twice at a word and seeing distinctly the same image,which later turns out not to be the same at all? Your brain anticipates a certain word and your vision,thanks to the brain,sometimes actually supplies the expected image. The eye is an editor, not only ruling out the lines above and below the one you are reading, but occasionally substituting the product of your firm conviction for the printer's word. A word ending may be ruled out visually if the dialect insists that it isn't there.

There are seemingly endless ways in which the language can express an idea. The teacher has to realize that some of those ways may be unfamiliar and misleading to the young reader. In the sports news the columnist writes:

> "The team has yet to come out with a victory for Coach Blatz."

Does "yet to" mean "not yet" to all the young readers? No matter how well an English speaking reader knows English syntax, he will need help interpreting the meanings of some of its constructions.

READING HAZARDS OF AN ADULT

Now let me share with you some of my observations from my own reading.

Multiple Meanings

The reader does not have to provide his own error in order to be surprised. Sometimes multiple meanings give him pause. In the U.S.News and World Report for February 7,1976, page 6, I found what I thought was a non sequitur:

> "...17 of the 38 Republican Senators must face the voters next year. That's a high percentage of vulnerable seats."

Omissions - the Reader's Own

For many years I have read student papers in which the apostrophes were missing, but little did I realize the magnitude of my own failings until I read a news report from a Berkeley hospital:

> "When some German pilots were shot down in World War II, fragments from their planes shattered windshields lodged in their eyes."

I had omitted the apostrophe plainly printed after the word planes'. Fragments didn't shatter windshields, and windshields weren't small enough to lodge in anybody's eyes anyway. I had been looking so hard for the verb that when I came to from their planes', I was happy to accept it as a completed phrase. It was the absurdity of the semantic relationships which sent me back to the ruination of my self-concept.

Omissions - the Author's

Omissions of parts of a syntactic unit cause problems for some readers, as Fagan found some years ago in his study at the University of Alberta. In Evelyn Waugh's biography, A Little Learning:The Early Years, I read:

> "Soon after our other new houses sprang up alongside us."

Where was the main clause? The our was clearly spelled ours, but I had been so sure that our was introducing a noun phrase that I missed the ending. If the author had written,

> "Soon after ours had been built"

I would have had no problem, but he had omitted what to him was unnecessary repetition, and I fell into the trap.

Frank Blair reporting news on NBC one day last year read:

> "Sales will be 10% off a year ago."

Should it have been "Sales were off 10% a year ago?" That wouldn't have been news. The writer whose report he was reading could have written:

> "Sales will be 10% off what they were a year ago."

That incident was more amusing than seriously misleading.

Nagel's Greece Travel Guide, generally beautifully written, has this delightful sentence:

> "The walled city is extraordinarily impressive; and once inside it,the Middle Ages seem to come to life."

I could just see all the middle-aged tourists coming to life. If it had read:

"and once you are inside it"

I could not have had such a good time.

Alex Haley in his very impressive book, Roots, has written:

> "Bell and the others worried, not about Kunte and the Massa but ... about the fiddler, who had left on the day before they had to play at a big society ball in Richmond."

I knew that Bell and the others didn't play for society balls and that fiddler did. Therefore I went back to pick up the proper intonation:

> "Fiddler, who had left the day before they had, to play at a big society ball in Richmond."

Our tendency as teachers is to ask for intonation before understanding has been achieved. As the saying goes, the impossible takes a little longer.

The ad on the cover of a paperback, Theroux's The Great Railway Bazaar, quotes the Saturday Review:

> "A rare kind of book that you never want to end."

The ambiguity could have been averted with:

"A book so rare that you never want it to end."

My cue to the author's intent was that the less flattering meaning would not have been used as a advertisement.

Lewis Lapham in Harper's September 1976 issue (p.5)

writes:

"The crowds gathered in the tent shows of wandering evangelicals remind me..."

The reader,having taken gathered as the verb in the sentence, is startled by another verb,remind. So back he goes either actually or mentally to realize that gathered,etc. is a modifier of crowds. "The crowds which gathered" would have prevented this small disaster. Or perhaps the writer intended "crowds which:were gathered".

....In Custer in '76 I found this sentence:

"There were two noted posts:Forts McPherson and Kearny, and these were needed supply and ..."

I thought there must be a printer's omission of to (these were needed to supply). But as I read on,

"These were needed supply and refuge points on the old Overland Trail."

I realized that supply-and-refuge points belonged together and that supply was not a verb,the printer not a villain. In passing, I was grateful to the author for having settled the meaning of the word posts immediately with the word Forts and a comma to suggest apposition.

Syntactic Role

In spoken language,intonation is a tremendous help to the reader in search of meaning. In written language,the reader must regroup for himself the words which appear with equal spacing. In English he must also decide on stress. Sometimes headlines,such as this one in the Christian Science Monitor for January 28,1977,create problems. These words

appeared on three lines:

"Cold Cuts
Fertilizer
Supply"

The startled reader has to regroup and inwardly intone not cold-cuts - all those thin slices in the little plastic bags - but

"Cold cuts fertilizer supply."

- a sentence.

"Cold Reduces Fertilizer Supply"

would have taken too much space. Save space and confuse the reader.

In an illustrated book entitled National Museum of Archaeology - Athens, a caption reads:

"Head of man, found on Delos"

A comma between man and found stands to keep the reader from thinking a man was found on Delos. He had only lost his head there. But I looked twice to consider what the comma was telling me.

Saul Bellow in To Jerusalem and Back writes:

"At what point would the animal need to survive break through..."

I wondered why the author hadn't hyphenated or written breakthrough as one word. But as I continued, I saw that need was a noun and break was the verb:

"At what point would the animal need to survive break through the restraints of custom and belief?"

A guidebook entitled What to See in Greece had a disturbing little habit:

"Later on the Christian architects..."

By "added a dome" I realized that on the Christian architects couldn't add anything,and corrected my phrasing:

"Later on, the Christian architects..."

Similarly, the author wrote:

"Very early on the city of Athens became..."

You may say that the preposition on is not suitable in either case, but the headlong reader does not always observe the niceties.

Stauffer in his excellent introduction to a compilation of research studies on a Language Experience Approach writes:

"To read in order to know the disciplined mind..."

and I thought I had the idea. But the rest of the sentence is:

"the disciplined mind acts with a problem in mind and question to answer."

From Evelyn Waugh's A Little Learning:The Early Years I read:

"As though to accentuate the desolation the brewers have painted...the first verse of the old song on a board outside it."

A comma after desolation would have helped me.

Again from the same author:

"...for inside it ...was rambling and haphazard."

With Queen Victoria dead,editors have dispensed with many a handy comma.

Unexpected Word-Choice

Sometimes a verb may attribute action to a subject which the reader thinks is inanimate. Waugh writes:

"Then the tube emerged into the open at Golders Green and round the station grew shops."

The verb emerged forced me to shift from my idea of a tube of toothpaste, solder, or glue. A subway/train can emerge into the open; that is, can surface, at a station. But how does a station grow shops? Round becomes the preposition around, round the station becomes a location, so the shops grew. But how do shops, also inanimate, grow? By being built. In untangling this very artful sentence I found the word station most comforting. Words which are associated with a concept, whatever their part of speech, create for the reader an image-building environment. Something that can emerge into the open at a place, a station; oh yes, the English call it a tube.

I had another encounter in Paul Theroux's The Great Railway Station Bazaar:

"The steam locomotives poured soot over the boarding passengers and darkened the sky with smoke."

The word poured seemed inappropriate to something that is spewed skyward. I could have expected the word rained, and I recalled standing with an umbrella over my head the night that the caterpillar tractors gave up trying to save the town of Kapoho from burial in lava particles. I supposed that the author used poured to express a deluge of soot in a case of excessively poor combustion. I exonerated him.

The Perils of Experience

Associations either from experience, vicarious or lived, or from many encounters with words in association with one another, are valuable assets when the expected occurs; but rather often it doesn't.

William Cole in "Trade Winds" in the Saturday Review writes what I take to be this:

> "A favorite suit of his underwear a sartorial metamorphosis."

A syntactic anomaly - the absence of a verb - took me back to this:

> "A favorite suit of his / underwent a sartorial metamorphosis."

A poor reader who read word by word, or a reader who was not familiar with English syntax, or a rapid reader speeding over his miscues, would have proceeded without correction, unaware in his underwear.

Similarly, I found this quotation in Saul Bellow's To Jerusalem and Back:

> "Full moon. It never really gets dark. The light bellies out on things."

The image of bellies reflecting light under a full moon faded as I sensed the need of a verb. When a noun, such as light, can also serve as an adjective, and when the verb which follows can also serve as a noun, the reader can think he has a bevy of nudes in full moonlight. But Bellow was not thinking of bellies.

Good authors tend to condense or telescope language, conveying many ideas in one sentence. In the book, Roots, Alex Haley writes:

". . the quiet, solii lead field hand Cato..."

I thought so.id lead (led) because of the familiar coupling of the word solid with metals. But I knew that Cato was the lead (lēd) field-hand, the one who gave orders to other workers in the field. In passing, I realized that calling Cato a hand was figurative. The plantation setting, knowledge of field labor structure, and remembrance of Cato as a character previously mentioned, were the ropes on which this endangered reader hung.

The Pervasive Syntax

Sometimes we appreciate syntax the most when it isn't there. Why do crossword puzzles frustrate those of you who are proudest of your vocabularies? It isn't just that two spaces reserved for a musical note or a printer's measure are less easily filled. One difficulty is that the synonym listed does not always suggest the syntactic role of the word you are to supply. Does No.16 mean sep' a rate, the adjective, or sep' a rate', the verb? Does it mean unconnected, disconnected, disembodied, or single, as an adjective? Or does it mean sever, intervene, isolate, sunder, or part, as a verb? Without a syntactic signal the reader is stuck with perhaps 9 or 10 possibilities instead of 4 or 5. A child is lucky not to be aware of all of these possibilities, but then he may never finish the puzzle, either.

Thank Goodness that is not the case with prose or poetry. Some researchers believe that syntax is a characteristic of sentences but not of paragraphs. I think they are misled by the visual evidence of an empty space between sentences. But even within sentences we have reviewed here, syntactic signals are sometimes missing in a sentence because the author feels they are clearly implied by the semantic relationships and their syntactic signals surrounding the word,phrase,or clause in question.

Syntax within a sentence helps you group words for their combined unitary meaning,and determine relationships - the interaction of the groups to arrive at the unitary meaning of the sentence. But that meaning is temporary. The addition of another sentence may make the reader alter his original decision. So there is an interaction and an implied syntactical relationship between and among sentences,within paragraphs, within chapters, and between chapters within entire books. An overgeneralization which could be tolerated might be that whereas the syntax of a sentence helpsthe reader relate the semantic elements to arrive at the unitary meaning of the sentence, the cognitive relationships between sentence meanings imply the syntax of the paragraph. Otherwise,how could we arrive at the unitary idea of the paragraph,if it has one?

We could eliminate paragraphs by putting the content of a paragraph into one sentence,complete with visible syntactic signals, as Buckminster Fuller has done in his philo-

sophical statement entitled And It Came to Pass - Not to Stay. He is writing on physical phenomena:

"So too does the complex wave package
Of human being pattern integrity
Begin to compound and
Expand regeneratively
The local environment's chemical association
And disassociation events;
Continually shunting more
And more chemical event patterns
Into its local disturbance -
Like a tornado gaining twist,
Power and visible presence on Earth
By inhibiting ever
Greater quantities of
Locally available dust, fibers
Water droplets and larger objects -
Until the new human being
Nine months later emerges
From its mother's womb
As a seven-pound, placid
Pink tornado."

So Buckminster Fuller condenses nine months of work, not all labor, into twenty lines of free verse. The syntactic signals are there to be seen and observed, but the concepts are so closely packed, the strings of modifiers so extensive, that a reader ordinarily requires more than one reading to understand it all, and still more to intone it properly. Lines 10 to 15 give the reader no place to drop his voice. False hopes are aroused by commas and ends of lines. You can see why in this

Century of the Common Man, most people settle for paragraphs and take their chances on the implied syntactic relationships. The trouble with most people , according to national and international surveys, is that they aren't very good at this,either. (National Assessment; Robert Thorndike's survey of 15 countries)

If you reject Buckminster Fuller's style, you miss a great deal worth learning. Try this:

"Rejecting the word 'creativity'
For use by any other than
The great intellectual integrity
Progressively disclosed as conceiving
Both comprehensively and anticipatorily
The complex interpatternings
Of reciprocal and transformative freedoms
In pure principle
Which apparently govern Universe
And constitute the verb God,
I go along with the 5,000-year-old
Philosophy of the Bhagvad-Gita
Which says "Action is the product
Of the qualities inherent in nature..
It is only the ignorant man,
Who,misled by personal egotism,
Says,"I am the doer."'

So, if Man's actions are not of his doing, then consider the invisible syntax joining this idea with Saul Bellow's in his book,To Jerusalem and Back:

> "Ruskin, writing of Thucydides' History, says that his subject was 'the central tragedy of all the world, the suicide of Greece.' Possibly we are once more at a suicidal point, and this is what Russian dissidents, people who have managed by heroic resistance to keep mind and judgment intact, are thinking when they consider our behavior."

So, if Man's actions are not of his doing, if we as a society are committing suicide while others reject our behavior, the reader must ask questions: Can intervention, as a natural phenomenon, prevent this suicide? Is it possible by intravenous feeding, to create a force strong enough to change the course by which civilizations repeatedly have fallen? Is it possible for Man to have both freedom and survival, the good life without the slow decay from self-indulgence?

Poetry and the Unexpected

Harker, in presenting a model for the comprehension of poetry, writes:

> "... the mature reader is constantly confronted with the unexpected. Much of what the reader has learned to predict about the structure of language is violated by poetry. Instead, poetry sets up its own grammatical rules and then proceeds to play variations on them in order to intensify the meaning communicated. In order to comprehend this meaning, the reader must abandon many of his expectations about language which can only interfere with his comprehension of poetry... the reader is required to alter

and to bring to the conscious level the process of reading which for him has become largely unconscious while reading prose."

Saul Bellow's prose is often poetic. This excerpt is such a passage:

"We drive toward Hebron. A Judean sun over the ribbed fields, the russet colors of winter, mild gold mixed with the light, and white stone terraces everywhere. Many times cleared, the ground goes on giving birth to stones; waves of earth bring forth more stone. The ancient fields are very small."

I was appreciative of the careful selection of words to heighten the clarity of the scene. But there was something beyond mere description. The expressions ribbed, giving birth, waves of earth bring forth more stone, suggest the Earth Mother bringing constant change, the natural condition. This sustained metaphor hovers over the scene, going beyond photography to the artist's interpretation and whatever reflection the reader undertakes.

The duality of message in poetry is exemplified further by this poem by Katha Pollitt, which is deceptively entitled "Onion":

"The smoothness of onions infuriates him
so like the skin of women or their expensive clothes
and the striptease of onions, which is also a
disappearing act.
He says he is searching for the ultimate nakedness
but when he finds that thin green seed

that negligible sprout of a heart
we could have told him he'd only be disappointed.
Meanwhile the onion has been hacked to bits
and he's weeping in the kitchen most unromantic tears."

The power of the poet to evoke an image with vividness, precision, and economy, and to draw the reader beyond the immediate reality to wonder at its many possible interpretations, is well presented in this final selection by Dorothy Emily McCullough, my sister and mentor:

Gardener in Autumn

"Here in the curtaining dusk alone I stand
In the mounded garden.
Haze of my leaf fire dims the moon,
And the rake's clean fingers are cool
In my smoke-hot hand.
I must go in, and soon.

How we have worn each other:I the garden and the garden me,
Weary together of the earth's
Deliberate fecundity.

To lay these brittle iris blades upon the fire
And watch them burn;
To scatter sand upon these tissues of the summer gone --
Sweet fern,striped grass,elm leaf,
Blue flax that hemmed the lawn --

Then to go in
And seek
The blessing of warm water on my cheek;
To sweep the teasing spider thread from off my chin,
And rout the splinter out that stabs my palm;
At last to sleep.

Wake me in March,
And then but long enough to know
That violets bloom in pulsing haste
Beneath these broken stems -- beneath the binding snow."

Thanks to many gifted and hard-working authors and their publishers, we have an abundance of literature. Thanks to our mentors, we know some of the literature, and ways to find the right book for the right child. But we still haven't learned how to help the child get meaning out of what he reads. Asking for answers is not enough. Many of us spend more hours moving materials than we do in helping children learn how to process what we have moved, perhaps because we still don't know what to do.

But we can educate ourselves to observe our own behaviors in reading, and can use our insights in helping students discover the strategies that will work for them. Then, perhaps, reading will be insightful, reflective, and appreciative in the highest sense. And then, perhaps, we can take satisfaction in being a pivotal agent toward an enduring civilization.

APPENDIX

Summary of the Findings in "Reading and Literature"

Expectation may be fulfilled falsely by one's own vision;
frustrated by the author's many possible choices;
" by the very nature of poetry and poetic prose.

Dissonance of several kinds (experiential,syntactic,semantic,
cognitive) alerts the reader to his error, or
to the author's purpose.

The various ways in which an idea can be expressed must be continually noted and retained by the listener and reader.

The reader can become uneasy when:

he thinks the sentence has no subject or no verb
or no main clause.

temporal restraints appear to have been violated.

he meets and followed by a N,V,Adj.,or Adv.,apparently joining a previous word of the same part of speech,which he does not recollect.

two verbs appear to vie for the predicate position (which having been omitted).

mistaking a verb for a noun, he has no verb for the sentence.

the verb expresses action of which the subject is incapable.

he mistakes a preposition for an adjective ('round).

multiple-meaning words offer too many semantic choices acceptable in the syntax.

his short-term memory is over-burdened with the compactness of language, as in poetry.

The reader can be fooled when:

a verb is omitted,leaving an auxiliary (had) to precede

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and unrelated infinitive (to play)

a form of be precedes an adjective derived from a verb and modifying a subsequent noun.

the referent (which) is omitted after the noun and the verb immediately following ends in -ed.

adjectives in a series preceding a noun bear several possible relationships to one another.

headlines group words inappropriately for the syntax and intent

an adverb which could be a preposition precedes a noun or pronoun which could be the object of the preposition.

a noun follows a noun which the reader construes to be an adjective.

a noun follows a verb but is actually the subject of the sentence

he fails to note the apostrophe for possession, and the following word is a verb form (-ed)(mistaken for predicate)

he ignores a comma.

a comma for clarity is omitted between an infinitive and the subject of the sentence;

between an adverbial phrase and the subject.

he fails to sense the sustained metaphor which compounds the author's motive and adds dimension to the reader's possible interpretations.

"Of course," .. the reader may be fooled more often than he is alerted to his miscalculations.

Note: This study will be completed in thirty years. Meanwhile it is recommended that other adults conduct inside-the-skull research so that we can see action before too many more generations.

C.McCullough, 1912 - ?

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